The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

By IRVING BACHELLER

Author of "Eben Holden," "D'ri and I," "Darrel of the Blessed Isles" "Keeping Up With Lizzie," Etc., Etc.

I rode in silence, thinking of Sally and of those beautiful days now receding into the past and of my aunt and uncle. I had written a letter to them every week and one or the other had answered it. Between the lines I had detected the note of loneliness. They had told me the small news of the countryside. How narrow and monotonous it all seemed to me then! Rodney Barnes had bought a new farm; John Axtell had been hurt in a runaway; my white mare had got a spavin!

"Hello, mister!"

I started out of my reveries with a little jump of surprise. A big, rough-

A Big, Rough Dressed, Bearded Man Stood in the Middle of the Road With a Gun on His Shoulder.

dressed, bearded man stood in the middle of the road with a gun on his shoulder.

"Where ye goin'?"

"Up to the Van Heusen place."

"*Where do* ye hail from?"

"*Cobles*kill."

"On business for Judge Westbrook?"

"Yes."

"Writs to serve?"

"Yes," I answered with no thought of my imprudence

"Say, young man, by hokey nettie! I advise you to turn right around and go back."

"Why?"

"'Cause if ye try to serve any writs ye'll git into trouble."

"That's interesting," I answered. "I am not seeking a quarrel, but I do want to see how the people feel about the payment of their rents."

"Say mister, look down into that valley there," the stranger began. "See all them houses—they're the little houses o' the poor. See how smooth the land is? Who built them houses? Who cleaned that land? Was it Mr. Livingston? By hokey nettie! I guess not. The men who live there built the houses an' cleaned the land. We ain't got nothin' else—not a dollar! It's all gone to the landlord. I am for the men who made every rod o' that land an' who own not a single rod of it. Years an' years ago a king gave it to a man who never cut one tree or laid one stone on another. The deeds say that we must pay a rent o' so many bushels o' wheat a year but the land is no good for wheat, an' ain't been for a hundred years. Why, ye see, mister, a good many things have happened in three hundred years. The land was willin' to give wheat then an' a good many folks was willin' to be slaves. By hokey nettie! they had got used to it. Kings an' magistrates an' slavery didn't look so bad to 'em as they do now. Our brains have changed—that's what's the matter—same as the soil has changed. We want to be free like other folks in this country. America has growed up around us but here we are livin' back in old Holland three hundred years ago. It don't set good. We see lots o' people that don't have to be slaves. They own their land an' they ain't worked any harder than we have or been any more savin'. That's why I say we can't pay the rents no more an' ye mustn't try to make us. By hokey nettie! You'll have trouble if ye do."

The truth had flashed upon me out of the words of this simple man. Until then I had heard only one side of the case. If I were to be the servant of justice, as Mr. Wright had advised, what was I to do? These tenants had been Grimshawed and were being Grimshawed out of the just fruits of their toil by the feudal chief whose remote ancestor had been a king's favorite. For half a moment I watched the wavering needle of my compass and then:

"If what you say is true I think you are right," I said.

"I don't agree with you," said young Latour. "The patroons have a clear title to this land. If the tenants don't want to pay the rents they ought to get out and make way for others."

"Look here, young man, my name is Josiah Curtis," said the stranger. "I live in the first house on the right-hand side o' the road. You may tell the judge that I won't pay rent no more—not as long as I live—and I won't git out, either."

"Mr. Latour, you and Purvis may go on slowly—I'll overtake you soon," I said.

They went on and left me alone with Curtis. He was getting excited and I wished to allay his fears.

"Don't let him try to serve no writs or there'll be hell to pay in this valley," said Curtis.

"In that case I shall not try to serve the writs. I don't want to stir up the neighborhood, but I want to know the facts. I shall try to see other tenants and report what they say. It may lead to a settlement."

We went on together to the top of the hill near which we had been standing. Far ahead I saw a cloud of dust but no signs of Latour and Purvis. They must have spurred their horses into a run. The fear came to me that Latour would try to serve the writs in spite of me. They were in his pocket. What a fool I had been not to call for them. My companion saw the look of concern in my face.

"I don't like that young feller," said Curtis. "He's in fer trouble."

He ran toward his house, which was only a few rods beyond us, while I started on in pursuit of the two men at top speed. Before my horse had taken a dozen jumps I heard a horn blowing behind me and its echo in the hills. Within a half a moment a dozen horns were sounding in the valleys around me. What a contrast to the quiet in which we had been riding was this pandemonium which had broken loose in the countryside. A little ahead I could see men running out of the fields. My horse had begun to lather, for the sun was hot. My companions were far ahead. I could not see the dust of their heels now. I gave up trying to catch them and checked the speed of my horse and went on at a walk. The horns were still sounding. Some of them seemed to be miles away. About twenty rods ahead I saw three riders in strange costumes come out of a dooryard and take the road at a wild gallop in pursuit of Latour and Purvis. They had not discovered me. I kept as calm as I could in the midst of this excitement.

I passed the house from which the three riders had just turned into the road. A number of women and an old man and three or four children stood on the porch. They looked at me in silence as I was passing and then began to hiss and jeer. It gave me a feeling I have never known since that day. I jogged along over the brow of the hill when, at a white, frame house, I saw the center toward which all the men of the countryside were coming.

Suddenly I heard the hoof-beats of a horse behind me. I stopped, and looking over my shoulder saw a rider approaching me in the costume of an Indian chief. A red mask covered his face. A crest of eagle feathers circled the edge of his cap. Without a word he rode on at my side. I knew not then that he was the man Josiah Curtis—nor could I at any time have sworn that it was he.

A crowd had assembled around the house ahead. I could see a string of horsemen coming toward it from the other side. I wondered what was going to happen to me. What a shouting and jeering in the crowded dooryard! I could see the smoke of a fire. We reached the gate. Men in Indian masks and costumes gathered around us.

"Order! Sh-sh-sh," was the loud command of the man beside me in whom I recognized—or thought that I did—the voice of Josiah Curtis. "What has happened?"

"One o' them tried to serve a writ an' we have tarred an' feathered him."

Just then I heard the voice of Purvis shouting back in the crowd this impassioned plea:

"Bart, for God's sake, come here."

I turned to Curtis and said:

"If the gentleman tried to serve the writ he acted without orders and deserves what he has got. The other fellow is simply a hired man who came along to take care of the horses. He couldn't tell the difference between a writ and a hole in the ground."

"Men, you have gone far enough," said Curtis. "This man is all right. Bring the other men here and put 'em on their horses an' I'll escort 'em out o' the town."

They brought Latour on a rail amidst roars of laughter. What a bear-

They Brought Latour on a Rail Amidst Roars of Laughter.

like, poultrified, be-poodled object he was—burred and sheathed in rumpled gray feathers from his hair to his heels. The sight and smell of him scared the horses. There were tufts of feathers over his ears and on his chin. They had found great joy in spoiling that aristocratic livery in which he had arrived.

Then came poor Purvis. They had just begun to apply the tar and feathers to him when Curtis had stopped the process. He had only a shaking ruff of long feathers around his neck. They lifted the runaways into their saddles. Purvis started off at a gallop, shouting "Come on, Bart," but they stopped him.

"Don't be in a hurry, young feller," said one of the Indians, and then there was another roar of laughter.

"Go back to yer work now," Curtis shouted, and turning to me added: "You ride along with me and let our feathered friends follow us."

So we started up the road on our way back to Cobleskill. Our guide left us at the town line some three miles beyond.

Latour was busy picking his arms and shoulders. Presently he took off his feathered coat and threw it away, saying:

"They'll have to pay for this. Every one o' those jackrabbits will have to settle with me."

"You brought it on yourself," I said. "You ran away from me and got us all into trouble by being too smart. You tried to be a fool and succeeded beyond your expectation."

It was dark when I left my companions in Cobleskill. I changed my clothes and had my supper and found Judge Westbrook in his home and reported the talk with Curtis and our adventure and my view of the situation back in the hills. I observed that he gave the latter a cold welcome.

"I shall send the sheriff and a posse," he said with a troubled look.

"Pardon me, but I think it will make a bad matter worse," I answered.

"We must not forget that the patroons are our clients," he remarked.

I yielded and went on with my work. In the next week or so I satisfied myself of the rectitude of my opinions. Then came the most critical point in my history—a conflict with Thrift and Fear on one side and Conscience on the other.

The judge raised my salary. I wanted the money, but every day I would have to lend my help, directly or indirectly, to the prosecution of claims which I could not believe to be just. My heart went out of my work. I began to fear myself. For weeks I had not the courage to take issue with the learned judge.

One evening I went to his home determined to put an end to my unhappiness. After a little talk I told him frankly that I thought the patroons should seek a friendly settlement with their tenants.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because their position is unjust, un-American and untenable," was my answer.

He rose and gave me his hand and a smile of forbearance in consideration of my youth, as I took it.

I left much irritated and spent a sleepless night in the course of which I decided to cling to the ideals of David Hoffman and Silas Wright.

In the morning I resigned my place and asked to be relieved as soon as the convenience of the judge would allow it. He tried to keep me with gentle persuasion and higher pay, but I was firm. Then I wrote a long letter to my friend the senator.

Again I had chosen my way and with due regard to the compass.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Man With the Scythe.

It was late in June before I was able to disengage myself from the work of the judge's office. Meanwhile there had been blood shed back in the hills. One of the sheriff's posse had been severely wounded by a bullet and had failed to serve the writs. The judge had appealed to the governor. People were talking of "the rent war."

What a joy entered my heart when I was aboard the steamboat, at last, and on my way to all most dear to me! As I entered Lake Champlain I consulted the map and decided to leave the boat at Chimney Point to find Kate Fullerton, who had written to the schoolmaster from Canterbury. My aunt had said in a letter that old Kate was living there and that a great change had come over her. So I went ashore and hired a horse of the ferryman.

I passed through Middlebury and rode into the grounds of the college, where the senator had been educated, and on out to Weybridge to see where he had lived as a boy. I found the Wright homestead—a comfortable white house at the head of a beautiful valley with wooded hills behind it—and rode up to the door. A white-haired old lady in a black lace cap was sitting on its porch looking out at the sunlit fields.

"Is this where Senator Wright lived when he was a boy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," the old lady answered.

"I am from Canton."

She rose from her chair.

"You from Canton!" she exclaimed. "Why, of all things! That's where my boy's home is. I'm glad to see you. Go an' put your horse in the barn."

I dismounted and she came near me.

"Silas Wright is my boy," she said. "What is your name?"

"Barton Baynes," I answered as I hitched my horse.

"Barton Baynes! Why, Silas has told me all about you in his letters. He writes to me every week. Come and sit down."

We sat down together on the porch.

"Silas wrote in his last letter that you were going to leave your place in Cobleskill," she continued to my surprise. "He said that he was glad you had decided not to stay."

It was joyful news to me, for the senator's silence had worried me and I had begun to think with alarm of my future.

"I wish that he would take you to Washington to help him. The poor man has too much to do."

"I should think it a great privilege to go," I answered.

"My boy likes you," she went on. "You have been brought up just as he was. I used to read to him every evening when the candles were lit. How hard he worked to make a man of himself! I have known the mother's joy. I can truly say, 'Now let thy servant depart in peace.'"

"'For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,'" I quoted.

"You see I know much about you and much about your aunt and uncle," said Mrs. Wright.

She left me for a moment and soon the whole household was gathered about me on the porch, the men having come up from the fields. They put my horse in the barn and pressed me to stay for dinner, which I did. As I was going the gentle old lady gave me a pair of mittens which her distinguished son had worn during his last winter in college. I remember well how tenderly she handled them!

"I hope that Silas will get you to help him"—those were the last words she said to me when I bade her goodby.

The shadows were long when I got to Canterbury. At the head of its main street I looked down upon a village green and some fine old elms. It was a singularly quiet place. I stopped in front of a big white meeting house. An old man was mowing in its graveyard near the highway. Slowly he swung his scythe.

"Do you know where Kate Fullerton lives?" I asked.

"Well, it's purty likely that I do," he answered as he stood resting on his snath. "I've lived seventy-two years on this hill come the fourteenth day o' June, an' if I didn't know where she lived I'd be 'shamed of it. Do you see that big house down there in the trees?"

I could see the place at which he pointed far back from the village street in the valley below us, the house nearly hidden by tall evergreens.

"Yes," I answered.

"Wal, that's the Squire Fullerton place—he's Kate's father."

"Does the squire live there?"

"No, sir—not eggzac'ly. He's dyin' there—been dyin' there for two year er more. By gosh! It's wonderful how hard 'tis fer some folks to quit breathin'. Say, be you any o' his family?"

"No."

"Nor no friend o' his?"

"No!"

"Course not. He never had a friend in his life—too mean! He's too mean to die, mister—too mean fer hell an' I wouldn't wonder—honest, I wouldn't—mebbe that's why God is keepin' him here—jest to meller him up a little. Say, mister, be you in a hurry?"

"No."

"Say, hitch yer hoss an' come in here. I want to show ye suthin'."

I dismounted and hitched my horse to the fence and followed him into the old churchyard, between weather-stained mossy headstones and graves overgrown with wild roses. Near the far end of these thick-sown acres he stopped.

"Here's where the buryin' begun," said my guide. "The first hole in the hill was dug for a Fullerton."

There were many small monuments and slabs of marble—some spotted with lichens and all in commemoration of departed Fullertons.

"Say, look a' that," said my guide as he pulled aside the stem of a leafy brier red with roses. "Jest read that, mister."

My keen eyes slowly spelled out the time-worn words on a slab of stained marble:

Sacred to the memory of
Katherine Fullerton

"Proclaim his Word in every place
That they are dead who fall from grace."

A dark shadow fell upon the house of my soul and I heard a loud rapping at its door which confused me until, looking out, I saw the strange truth of the matter. Rose leaves and blossoms seemed to be trying to hide it with their beauty, but in vain.

"I understand," I said.

"No ye don't. Leastways I don't believe ye do—not correct. Squire Fullerton dug a grave here an' had an empty coffin put into it away back in 1806. It means that he wanted everybody to understan' that his girl was jest the same as dead to him an' to God. Say, he knew all about God's wishes—that man. Gosh! He has sent more folks to hell than there are in it, I guess. Say, mister, do ye know why he sent her there?"

I shook my head.

"Yis ye do, too. It's the same ol' thing that's been sendin' women to hell ever since the world begun. Ye know hell must 'a' been the invention of a man—that's sartin—an' it was mostly fer women an' children—that's sartiner—an' fer all the men that didn't agree with him. Set down here an' I'll tell ye the hull story. My day's work is done."

We sat down together and he went on as follows:

"Did ye ever see Kate Fullerton?"

"Yes."

(Continued next week.)

United States Railroad Administration
NORFOLK SOUTHERN RAILROAD
Passenger Train Schedules—Corrected to February 1, 1919
As information, not guaranteed.

	South and West Bound No. 5	No. 1	No. 3.
Leave			
Eliz. City	x10:03am	x11:35am	x10:17pm
Arrive			
Edenton	11:15am	12:35pm	11:31pm
Mackeys		1:20pm	12:04am
Columbia		y 2:40pm	y10:30am
Belhaven		y 3:00pm	y10:45am
Pinetown		x 2:20pm	1:20am
Washington		3:00pm	1:55am
New Bern		4:35pm	4:00am
Oriental		7:30pm	y12:10pm
Morehead City		7:45pm	x10:50am
Beaufort		8:05pm	11:10am
Goldsboro		8:45pm	6:35am
	No. 38		
Lv Elizabeth City			11:00am
Ar Suffolk			2:20pm
Ar Greenville		4:01pm	3:02am
Ar Wilson		5:35pm	4:45am
Ar Raleigh		7:45pm	7:05am
Ar Charlotte			2:45pm

	North Bound No. 4	No. 2	No. 6.
Leave			
Eliz. City	x 6:00am	3:00pm	z 3:30pm
Ar Norfolk	8:10am	4:50pm	5:30pm

x Daily
y Daily except Sunday.
6 Tuesday, Thurs. and Sat. only.

G. B. UNDERWOOD, Traffic Agt. Edenton, N. C.
E. S. DOUGLASS, Tck. Agt., Elizabeth City, N. C.

THE INDEPENDENT continues to do the best job printing.